ON EMOTION IN THERAPY (1990 REVISION*)

by Eugene Gendlin

Eugene T. Gendlin is Professor of Psychology at the University of Chicago, and was for many years the Editor of *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice.* His article published here with his permission is a finely-nuanced discussion of emotions in relation to the mind-body interface. Response to the article or requests for the latest information about the Focusing Method he pioneered can be directed to him in care of the Department of Behavorial Sciences, University of Chicago, 5848 S. University, Chicago, IL 60637. Please enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope.

This paper is concerned with three questions:

In focusing we find that a bodily sense can know a great deal about our situations. How is it possible for the body to have all this information?

We find not only old information. Focusing on a bodily felt sense can bring creative steps of new development and resolution. How can the body lead to something new to the culture, and more intricate than we could deliberately invent? In other words, how are the steps we get in focusing possible?

Thirdly, how do emotions differ from a felt sense, and how are the two to be dealt with, to bring therapeutic change?

I will first discuss these questions theoretically, and then turn to practice.

I distinguish emotion from "felt sense." A felt sense is a vague, implicitly complex, physical feeling which can come in your body in regard to any situation or any aspect of life. I will try to show why in psychotherapy we must focus on the felt sense. To do so seems unpromising at first. A felt sense seems vague and also much less intense than an emotion. We must surely welcome all emotions during therapy, especially blocked ones that have not been felt. But the felt sense is needed to reach what gives rise to emotions, as well as for new steps.

I. THEORY

The First Question: How does the body know so much?

Body and environment together make up one interactional process. The body is made of environmental materials. Every living body contains (implies, is with, is of, is in, is ...) the environment. Of course, your legs are made for walking, but also all the way up into your body your organs are arranged so that walking is possible and implied to happen. If you sit too long, a need to walk develops in your whole body. Animals that climb trees have differently constructed bodies, not just different limbs. An aquatic creature differs from us in every bit of it. From one bone of a pre-historic animal one can infer not only the whole of its body, but also the whole environment, and what its body does in it. The concrete body develops from one cell — it is a product of life-processes. These are all interactions with an environment. Interactional information about the environment is therefore implicit in body-structure and in every bodily process.

A sentient body not only is, but also feels its interactions with the environment. We must not think of feeling just as the emotions. Emotions are narrower and more specific. I will discuss them below. They come sometimes, but animals (including humans) sense their interaction with the environment all the time. This bodily-sensed interaction implicitly contains the complex information I just mentioned. A vast amount of information is sensed — not in separated facets — but as a global, bodily sentience.

In the history of thought, this bodily sentience is a crucial, forgotten dimension! We have been accustomed to assume that only the five external senses give us information about the environment. Such sense-data are then supposedly arranged by associa-

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tion and thought. Feelings were said to be mere "reactions to" the facts — after the facts are given by the five external senses and reason. For two millennia feelings were said to contain no information about one's situational reality. How could this have been believed?

Almost the only feelings that were considered were the emotions, that well-known list of recognizable, definable feelings such as anger, fear, sadness, joy, triumph, etc. But, the emotions had a bad reputation because they can get in the way of dealing with the external things. That gave feeling in general a bad reputation.

There is a more basic sensing: sentient tissue-process and sentient behavior. Animal bodies sense the complex environment with which their tissues interact, and with which they behave.

An animal body does not just react to external stimuli. It prefigures and implies its own continuing life-process. It is born with a highly structured set of tissue and behavior processes. At every moment it prefigures and implies a next step of these processes. Behavior sequences are inherited along with bodily structure. Animals have inherited mating dances, nest-building, infant-care, and intricate food-search, all part of their bodily-sentient processes. And, we, too, inherit not only the lungs, but also the breathing behavior, not only the sex organs but also the sexual intercourse sequence. Human infants need to, and soon do crawl — they don't learn from the adults around them.

Of course there is also fresh perception, but it occurs into (and modifies) an already highly structured, bodily implication of next steps of life-process.

In humans this bodily implying is elaborated (not newly created) by culture and learning. Much of human brain-expansion happened after culture already existed. Culture elaborated our bodies and brains, and made the environmental interaction even more complex. But we sense this elaborated environment physically, with our bodies.

Your situation is not just what the five senses give you. Consider: Does your sense of a situation consist of bits of color, sound, and smell, arranged by your thoughts? No, a situation doesn't consist of sense-bits. Nor does it consist of separate bits of any sort. You can think of a few special factors, but you cannot think all of the parts of a situation separately.

But you speak and act from a sense of the whole situation. That sense guides how you act and what you say, think, and need, in the situation. You would be lost without that bodily sense of the situation.

How could psychology have missed this for so long? To be sure, we were said to feel our bodies "kinesthetically", but that word means the sense of motion when we move. Similarly, the "proprioceptive sense" was said to be the sense of our posture. It seems not to have been known that we have a bodily sense of each situation in which we live and act.

How could that have been missed? I think it was because this bodily sense is not usually a direct, inner datum. We don't notice it, because usually no "it" comes inside, unless we first pay an odd kind of attention in the body. Only then does it come. Then it comes as an inner datum, an inwardly sensed this, we have a new term for it: "a felt sense."

People rarely have a felt sense. We usually act and speak sentiently, but without stopping to let that sentience come to us as a datum of inner attention. We attend to the people, and the things. Inwardly there are emotions, thoughts, images and memories, usually not a felt sense.

In all ages people must have had this type of body-sense, but only at rare times. Some people, for example poets, had it more often, but, even today it is not yet widely known.

At rare times, perhaps when we are in difficulty, we might pay direct attention to how the body feels in the situation. Then a unique body-sense of this situation can come, in response to attending in the body. Sometimes it is already there, but not usually. For most people some learning is necessary, before they can attend so as to let such a direct object of reflective attention come in their bodies.

From a felt sense we can obtain much more intricate and better information about the situation, and how we are living in it. The great amount of pre-separated information I mentioned earlier is implicit in the felt sense. But at first, when a felt sense comes, it is an unclear, murky sense, and seems quite unpromising. One does not know what it is one feels. To spend time attending to such a concrete sense of something, without quite knowing what it is, that is what we call "focusing" (Gendlin, 1981).

So far I have tried to answer my first question, how our bodies can "know" so much about our situations. It is because bodies are interactions, because much of that is sentient, and because the sentience can also come as an inward datum, a felt sense.

The Second Question: How are new and more intricate next steps possible?

In focusing we find not just old information, but new steps. Before we discuss that, we have to understand that even old information is not just static — not like a state. Rather, it is always a bit of ongoing process, and its coming then always implies next bits of process. Let me first make that clearer:

Bodily sentience always implies a next move. We should not say of sentience that it just is; rather, it is for a next move. Inhaling brings an implied exhale. Feeding implies digestion and defecating. Only as one bit actually happens, does the next one become implied. So these are not items of information just next to each other, as in a file. You must actually inhale, to get the implied exhale.

In focusing it often seems as if the next step contradicts the previous. I felt bored, and then, focusing on the whole felt sense, I find I am angry, and then, focusing on that changed felt sense, I find I am really afraid I can't handle the situation, and then further, that I can handle it but I have this odd sense that I'm not supposed to be able to handle it, and that, in turn, is because ... , hmm. After more such steps, perhaps now I can. These steps were not already there, waiting, separated and next to each other. To get to the last one, I had first to live in each of the others. The actual coming of each has the effect of changing the whole, so that the next one can actually form — and imply a further step.

Each bit of life-process is always also a further implying. The body's sentience is not a mere perception of how things are, as if what to do about it were a different question. It is not like a committee report which has a first section on the facts, and a second on recommendations. And, even there that distinction doesn't work: The committee members fight about how to construe the facts, precisely because that will imply what needs to be done. Bodily sentience is an implying of next moves. You don't first feel hot, and then, after that, feel a desire to be cooler. The sense of "hot" is the wanting to be cooler, and moves to cool off are implicit in it.

Values are not external additions to facts. Nor are meanings added on, as if attached later. Bodily sentience is intricately meaningful, but it isn't a static meaning. Rather, it is the implying of further events and next moves.

Hunger is not just a static state. It "means" food, and food means something to a hungry animal. But "means" is not a static relation of one thing merely representing another. Rather, food "means" — by changing hunger to satiation, rest, and the need to defecate. Bodily sentience means the next body-environment event.

Lower animals are engaged entirely in life-necessary moves. Higher animals also explore and play. This must not be thought of as involving less of the body. Compared to the most essential life-processes, exploration and play involve a wider bodily sentience, the sentience of a wider environment and many more possible next moves. Human situations now involve much that was once the result of play and exploration.

Bodily sentience totals all possible moves into one actual, unique next move. As I said earlier, many facets are totaled up, which were never previously separated. We need the concept of a pre-separated multiplicity here. Much that can be separated out, has never been separated out. We must not think of it as a lot of separate facets, lying next to each other, unconsciously sensed separately. Rather, the body is this sentient totaling, without first having each one.

For example, I walk into a room full of people, greet some of them, and sit down in an available chair. In a few short moments my face has interacted with several individuals. Some got a warm look, others a different fitting acknowledgement. My face does that. I don't usually control my face, and when I try, I can't be sure of it. I don't need to recall my internal feeling-things about these people. My body knows them. It implicitly contains my history with these people. Consciously I may be thinking only that I wish I weren't late.

We are all familiar with this wise bodily sentience ininteraction. It can drive the car, do much of our work, and act more or less appropriately most of the day, without forming into distinct things like an emotion or a felt sense.

After I sit down, if I wish, I can find what it was, in me, which greeted each person. I would have to

attend in my body, to let a distinct felt sense of each of them come. It is not already there, and yet what greeted them was not just unconscious in me. I can sense a continuity between this felt sense which just came, and what my face did with each. What it did now seems quite understandable, given this felt sense — and yet both my felt sense and my facial expression were quite new — I haven't seen this person since last week's events, and these were totaled in along with past history. What a lot of complexity there is in a little half-smile!

Quite new next steps are really commonplace, aren't they? And yet, our theories make novelty a puzzle. They assume that explanation must show that what happens was only some rearrangement of earlier experiences. The past functions in any present, certainly. But we notice that something is wrong when we get the past itself, rather than the new present.

So the current theories are not right, to assume that the past functions like numbers in a math problem, which remain the same and are only re-arranged, to produce the answer.

It is especially wrong to consider the body as a fixed system that can change only over millennia of evolution. Quite the contrary!

The fact that different species do evolve shows that the living body is not a fixed thing. But didn't we say that behavior like breathing and walking comes along with the individual's body-structure? Isn't inherited behavior pretty well fixated? No, in a moment a new bodily totaling can change it. Put an ant on a fuzzy rug; now it crawls quite oddly, a new more intricate crawl that was never part of its repertoire. What happens is an interaction with the rug. The ant need not first learn this new crawl — it comes out new — and more intricate than its usual crawl. A body's capacity for behavior does not consist of fixed repertory units. When either body or environment changes, that implies and shapes the next move so that it can be new and more intricate.

Emotions narrow the sentient context

The cat's body ongoingly senses many things around it. It explores each thing, and hears the slightest noise. But at certain cues (for example, a strange cat in its territory) the cat's body suddenly gets ready to fight. There is a huge physical change: its tail is suddenly thick, its heart pounds, and the cat hisses. Its whole body is taut. Now it ignores much of the surroundings to which it usually attends so sensitively. Only with difficulty could its attention be distracted from the other cat. The scope of its attention is narrowed.

The emotions of animals are just as valid as ours. Animals also feel ours. When someone cries, the dog or cat will come and try to lick the person's face. The only difference is that animals have their feelings only inaction, not as inward things in an inward space.

Inaction, the higher animals have both the wide and the narrowed interactional sentience. Human inner things get made from both of these. Inner emotions are made from the narrowed sentience. The felt sense is made from the all-inclusive sentience.

Even narrowed, the cat still knows *what it was that made it* angry and ready to fight. It was the other cat. But if it wants to find out just how the other cat could have gotten in, that will have to be done later when our cat is calm again. The cat will then remember where it first saw the other cat, and it will search that spot suspiciously many times. It will also look in other spots, when it is again sensitive to the slightest thing. But right now it cannot sense all that, because its body has experienced a large change: it has become fight-ready. We say it is angry. The cat's emotion is just as valid, even though its fight-readying does not form as an inner datum, attended to as something within the body, or in an inner space.

For animals it is adaptive that their sentience narrows and zeros in on what is relevant for fight, flight, freeze, or on whatever special interaction suddenly comes to be implied by the body. Animals fight physically. For humans, such anger is obviously adaptive in a brawl, or for foot-soldiers in bayonet charges. But, for much of modern warfare, or in boxing under rules, and in our daily battles, anger is not always adaptive. Mostly we fight not just physically, but by means of the complexities of a human context. When we are angry, we miss some of that context. Not all of it is brought into awareness by bodily fight-readying. Therefore we may fight better when we have cooled off. And yet, we would not want to be without anger. Without it coming in us, we may also fail to find a way in a situation. It is often anger that must do it for us — by breaking up a situation, or by changing it, or stopping someone (Gendlin, 1971).

Similarly, our working, eating, and sexual situations have all been elaborated so that our next moves must form from the wider sense of the wider environment, and yet — we need our emotions and appetites for these situations. It is frequently their failure to come at the needed times, which brings people to psychotherapy. Some of the most important aspects of life involve emotions. After all, it is just because of this great importance that nature narrows the interaction down to them so suddenly and completely, when these parts of living come by.

So it cannot be a question of preferring the felt sense over emotions, or vice versa. Obviously we need to understand the relations they have to each other.

So far we saw one relation between them: Emotions arise out of the wider context, which their coming then narrows. This has not been well understood. One cannot recover the origin of an emotion by sensing only the emotion itself.

Nor can one finish with an emotion just by feeling it over and over again. Some therapists assume a finite quantity of past "garbage" in the body. They think that, if all of it could come out, none of it would be left inside. But emotions cannot be exhausted. They are not things that lie in us, as if we could "get them out." Rather, emotions are freshly generated, each time they come. We can let an emotion come, over and over again, just by bringing home to ourselves some situation that did — and will again — make us have that emotion. Once it comes, we no longer sense all of the situation that made it come. Before it came, we sensed the wider context only in action, not as a felt sense. To let the wider sensing come as a felt sense may be the only way to then get steps of change into that wider context which gives rise to the emotion.

Let us look more closely at when emotions come: Emotions come at certain distinct spots in a story of events. Only certain event-sequences can make you angry or guilty. Similarly, fear and shame come just at certain spots in a story of events. Culture has elaborated our situations, and that largely determines now when a human will have a given emotion. All sorts of things that an animal would not stand for can be done to you without your becoming angry; it depends on the story of events. You are insulted only when others do or say certain things.

Emotions are a short list: I mentioned anger, fear, guilt, shame, and of course also joy, triumph, sorrow, jealousy, and awe. There is no agreement just which further ones should be included, and one can see why: There is a very wide range of "feelings" which are not all called emotions. Some of these do have names: for example: hope, disappointment, helplessness, longing, depression, being overwhelmed, missing someone, embarrassment, looking forward to something, feeling as if someone is always about to criticize you — these too are feelings. So it was always absurd to think of human feelings as only emotions. These others do at least have names, but there is a vast gamut of other feelings that we all know, yet they have no names. To tell about them, we need to devise a new phrase, and sometimes we need to tell a whole story. The story might be the actual events, or an as-if story: "I feel as if I were in a prison, and as if it were up to that person whether I could ever get out."

Those we are inclined to call "feelings" have more of the context with them, even if they have a name. Those that require telling a whole story have even more context. We see that when we focus on them. Sometimes the texture of the context goes on and on: For instance: "It feels like if I do anything, it will be wrong and make things worse; I'll have spoiled it; if I hadn't touched it, it could have been wonderful, and I won't be able to fix it because I never was, which is all that sadness, that's still there. And always, what I do is ... and that doesn't work because ..., and that makes me angry (note the several emotions embedded in this texture of a feeling) — whew, what a lot of anger ... hm; it sort of protects me from seeing, uhm .... if I saw I would .... and that would be bad because ...." On and on.

To sense all of that texture at once would be a felt sense, but that texture is no static fact — the whole texture changes, the quality of the parts changes, the felt sense changes, shifts, as each new bit emerges.

The common feelings that have no name and need a story approach the texture-width of a felt sense, and it is not difficult to get to a felt sense from them.

As we just saw, such a "feeling" contains, or rather can generate or re-generate a number of emotions as we enter into it. Emotions are embedded within such a texture! So emotions only seem to have less context, because they come in certain recognizable spots in a very regular and short story (like the other cat invading this one's territory). Actually the emotion is part of two stories: the short one and the whole context.

Very traditional people sometimes frustrate a therapist. If one asks "Why did you get angry?" they tell only the event. On further questioning they are puzzled: "What are you asking me? Wouldn't anyone be angry in my spot?" Indeed, many people in the same culture would get angry then, but we know from therapy, and especially from focusing, that the wider context is involved also in the coming of emotions. That seemingly endless wider context was there, and does have much to do with how the emotion arose, but only the emotion forms as an inward datum. Then the context is missing except when one is in action again. In order to sense the whole context which gave rise to the emotion, it would have to come as a felt sense.

We saw, first, that emotions are not things by themselves. Emotions are only part of a story, usually a narrow story. But, secondly, we saw that this narrow story is itself only part of the story. The wider context was involved in giving rise to the emotion, although then the emotion seems to have come only in its narrowed story. A strange cat came in, and must be fought. Just where and how is not part of fighting it now.

II. PRACTICE

We saw that humans have two kinds of inner things. The wide sentience can become an inner datum as a felt sense. In contrast to animals, our narrowed zeroing-in can become an inner datum, something we can hide and carry on in self-responding on an inner space — an emotion. But obviously we still retain the animal's capacity to be sentient in action, both with the wide sentience, and emotion in action.

Being human involves both the spontaneous rolling out, and the inward self-responding. If we lack the self-responding, we feel much of ourselves only when we act. But we also lose too much, if we lack the spontaneous moving out. We need both.

Let me first discuss what other modes of therapy — especially those that move outward, may add to focusing, and then turn to how focusing adds something that they miss.

The place of focusing in psychotherapy

In a real sense focusing misses every other useful avenue of therapy. It needs to be combined with them all.

Focusing is an entry into a crucial mode of sensing. Every other method of therapy works much more effectively when focusing is added. But one cannot gain this advantage if one uses only focusing and not the other methods!

Focusing improves other methods by letting them work as they are intended. For example, no psychoanalyst ever says: "I intend my patients to have only cognitive insights." Rather, the interpretations are intended to reach a deep level. By focusing, patients take interpretations down to that deep level; they try them out there, just as interpretive therapists intend. Similarly, focusing enables clients to do Gestalt role-play as Gestalt therapists intended— not as a play that is first thought up and then acted, but as arising directly from sensing the body. And so it is with all the methods. They intend and wish for it, but they lack the specific, differentiated steps to find the felt sense. All therapists intend their methods to be used on the deep level which a felt sense makes possible, and their clients sometimes do that. They can do it more often if focusing is added to each method.

On the other hand, if we use only focusing by itself, we lack almost everything. I have never proposed focusing as a method of therapy by itself. Why miss anything that is helpful? It may seem daunting to combine hundreds of therapies, but most of them do not really differ, except in the global conceptions in which they are advertised. We need to look for real differences. Some of these concern what I call "the avenue" on which a therapy takes place. I think we want to combine all the avenues.

For example, interpersonal interaction is a main avenue of therapy. Focusing has to be understood as happening best *within* an interaction. Even when silent throughout, focusing is usually deeper in the company of a partner than when done alone. To resolve some things, one needs a steady person on the other end of the process. But interaction is much more than the wider context of focusing. The events of the interaction itself can bring therapeutic change.

Some other avenues of therapy are dreams, imagery, role-play (as in Gestalt reversal), dance-movement, action-steps during the week, and catharsis. It may seem hard to relate these avenues, but they are already unified in every human being, since each person has them all. Why tell a client "I work only with your feelings, not your dreams," or "Here we only go inside, we ignore our interaction," — why exclude any major human dimension?

It is true that some avenues fit some clients *more easily* than others, but it is wrong to limit people to just those dimensions which they have already developed. For example, jogging is good also for sedentary people, not just for athletes. A little of what a person lacks can make a lot of difference. We should neither force, nor preclude any avenue of therapy on a client.

Rather than arguing these against each other, let us look for the specific processes that are actually used on each avenue. These go very well together in practice. Each makes us responsive to a range of observations, and that sensitivity stays with us when we practice the others, and improves them.

Focusing is like a motor. It powers all the other methods like a motor powers the car. Wheels and chassis don't move without it. But who can drive anywhere in just a motor?

This analogy overstates the case for focusing. No single way can be the only way for human beings. It also overstates the need for other methods; one can go far with focusing alone. But let us always ask, "What can we learn from the other method?" as well as,"How would that method work better with focusing?"

Completing an expressive sequence:

Many events, especially in childhood, generate strong emotions and at the same time block their expression. If a child can cry, shake, and scream, it is sooner done with a painful event. But, along with bad events, children are usually prohibited from expressing anything. One meaning of "completing" an incomplete experience is to let these long-missing expressive sequences happen.

Another kind of "completion" concerns the interaction — what one could not tell the original people, how one could not fight back. Incomplete interactions need to be completed. A great deal of old anger can sometimes be best completed if the client directs to the person a single sentence stating the truth (Jackins, 1962). But in therapy there needs to be room and welcome to cry the uncried tears, to sob, shake, or move to express old pain and fury in more than words.

But it is not a question only of completing old, blocked expressions, but also of developing new and freer ways of being.

Welcoming — not stopping — any expressive rolling out

Cathartic therapists are right to tell other therapists not to stop expressive discharge, however intense it may be. Clients find it hard to stop a discharge for some minutes, until it completes itself. Trying to stop it gives inexperienced therapists and clients a scary sense of being out of control. Then the client may remain unnecessarily afraid of some half-known thing for years. Instead, stay right there with the client. If the client is pounding the wall, put a pillow between. That's all that's necessary.

The reason inexperienced therapists stop catharsis is because it can look awful. That is because you are on the outside; waves of emotional expression are coming *at you*. If you have experienced catharsis from within, moving outward, then you know it feels precious, life-forwarding, not something you would want stopped.

A person's body may shake, there may be sobs and nose-running, but it feels good from inside. A pillow between the wall and hands or feet is all you need to worry about. I have dents in my file cabinet and bashed-in plaster in my wall. I am pleased with both.

I welcome discharge when it has already come.

The next question is whether it should be deliberately engendered, and, if so, with whom and when. On that question agreement is not so easy, and I am not as sure of the way I have chosen.

Indicating that catharsis is an open possibility

My way is not to decide for someone whether or not catharsis should happen. But I do indicate that it might come, and that it will be welcome if it comes. At some early point I say "You know, you can scream into one of those pillows, if that ever feels right to you." I might even demonstrate it, if the client doesn't believe that such a thing could be. Or, I might say, "You can tip that mattress up against the wall and kick it," and actually show how the mattress tips up, and demonstrate the motions. "That may feel right to do, sometime, or it might not."

This opens many possibilities. It shows that one doesn't have to sit still all the time. Some clients know other modes, for instance Gestalt or move-

ment therapy; now they know they can get up and move here, if they wish. It tends to free the space for what might come to a client to do, like pounding the couch.

I believe that catharsis should be an open, known, and included possibility. Beyond that I don't believe I should engender it.

One client, after having used catharsis extensively and I think helpfully, went on to a much farther, deeper process in which it has not reappeared. Perhaps she will need it again. She knows it well, and knows I welcome it. Another client is now using it as a helpful, but quite small part of a much wider process.

On the issue of pushing or not pushing, I know where I stand. But we need more specific ways to practice catharsis well.

Moving outward:

If therapy deals only with inward data, whether emotion or felt sense, it missed a crucial dimension of the process of change. Therapy must involve more than focusing on inner data in reflective inner space. There also needs to be a movement outward, into interaction. Focusing as such does not sufficiently provide the moving out.

For example, Gestalt provides for spontaneously rolling out. I have already said how focusing helps this come from a deeper place, but with focusing alone this rolling out may not happen at all.

In the theoretical part of this paper I said that animals have emotions and the wide sensing, but only inaction, not as reflected-upon inner things. I did not mean that humans have them only as inner things! We have emotions and the wide sensing in both ways, both as inner data and inaction.

In inner and outward modes, the content can seem to be the same, but the whole manner of being alive is different. To change in a major way, both are necessary. To add this to focusing, I advise not specifically catharsis, but any of the modes of therapy that move outward. Most frequently I recommend Gestalt, which I have also included in working with dreams ("Question 8," Gendlin, 1986).

This dimension is more general than discharge, or role-play, or action-steps. It is constantly available in every interaction. A knowledge of this dimension lets therapists welcome it, when clients move outward, in the interaction with us.

The knowledge of this dimension also enables us to bring it into the room ourselves. Without thinking about it, we instance it. For example, when I have very shy student-therapists, I instruct them to interrupt every client very often for a week or two until they can move through that habitual shyness and fear. Then it becomes easy, and they can distinguish their real sensitivity from mere shyness. Some experienced therapists, while not shy or afraid, are habitually so quiet and controlled that the client cannot move out to encounter a solid person.

None of this is meant to return to the popular prejudice that unreflective behavior is more real than inner space. Inward process develops and widens the inner source of moving out, but the moving out does have to happen.

This dimension of therapy can be implicit in any other method without taking extra time. Moving out, rolling out, is an essential dimension of therapeutic change that is not provided by inward process dealing only with inner data.

How would the rolling-out methods work better, with focusing? How catharsis misses the felt sense

The straightforward "discharge" or "catharsis" of emotions is certainly valuable, especially where certain emotions have been blocked. Rolling out, unreflectively, can be a way to find and release such blocked modes of the body. But it is also important to attend inwardly, to find the emotion as an inner referent. Experienced Gestalt clients seem not to know what I mean at first when I say, "Now that this has rolled out, can you sense the inner place that it comes from?" After someone has cried, I may say, "There is a crying place there — can you feel it inside?"

So that is one distinction: from inside moving outward is not the same thing as moving inward and letting inward data form. Both are important.

To feel something as an inner object is a change. People who "act out" , lack but can discover that emotion inwardly. To do so is a change, not just a representation. Feeling something makes a change in it. It becomes different from how it was in acting out.

Another distinction is between emotions we have often felt, and one that could not come before, so we feel it now for the first time at its full depth. Every emotion is a major bodily change, as we saw. Those that are familiar make the same change in us again and again. But an emotion we have not fully felt before, or have not expressed into outward action before, brings about a change in what and how we are. This may have to be repeated a number of times, so that we change. But once that has happened, feeling and discharging the same emotion brings no more change.

For therapy, emotions that have never been expressed or have never been inwardly felt before need to be distinguished from having the same familiar emotions over and over again. That doesn't mean we dismiss long familiar emotions. In therapy there must be respect and room for whatever comes, and it may also soon lead to something new. But we know that no more therapeutic change can be expected from feeling and expressing just this emotion again.

Some therapists seem to know only the one fact, that feeling something fully, all the way, brings change. So if a troubling emotion can still come, they assume that it must not have been felt fully enough. But it is not mysterious why the emotion can still come. That does not indicate anything wrong. It can be regenerated indefinitely from deeply entering into the past events that made it.

But what if it still comes at troubling times, and prevents a fresh experience of the present? What if the evidence is clear that something is still wrong in regard to it? Then I argue that discharging it over and over, just now, won't help that. We need the felt sense of the wider context to form, and lead to other emotions related to the problem which have not yet formed, and a series of the different kinds of steps that can come from a felt sense.

Like the coming of an emotion, the coming of a felt sense is a great bodily change. Even if it leads to no further steps, just its coming is a change in the whole body. The whole sentience which just was inaction, rolls itself into a datum, so that there is now also an "I" who senses — "this." Yet its coming may seem a slight change — everything just a shade different. The felt sense may seem to be only a slight wisp. Without a trained sensitivity for how the body feels from inside, one can miss it. That its coming was a change is more evident, when the little steps of change begin to come from the felt sense. These may be quite intense.

New and old intense emotions can emerge from a felt sense. It is important to understand that even the old emotions have already somewhat changed when they come in the context of a felt sense. The ensuing steps soon show that change.

"Ah," one says, "there is that old sadness ..." as if it were no different than ever. And yet, one is breathing differently, sensing it as part of its whole context, and this old context itself part of the wider present moment, now. Soon little steps that are quite new can come.

A felt sense is always in present time, and in the present interaction. Much of the past is in a felt sense, but totaled-in along with the present situation.

Of course, the present interaction, a friendly person present, makes a huge difference when one is only re-living something from the past. How can we clarify this distinction? We all agree that present interaction is always important, and affects how the past is experienced. In addition to this, I am arguing that the formation of a felt sense is still another way in which the present can affect how the past is experienced. That is because a felt sense is always a fresh, present totaling in which the parts do not retain their old quality.

When people accustomed to catharsis have a feeling, they move immediately to a narrower and more intense mode in which there is only the past. And which past? Usually a familiar past. Then the same emotions will be discharged, over and over. That is not usually the intention of the therapist or the person. The issue is not that the therapists of cathartic methods don't know that repetition doesn't help after a while.[1] But a new training is needed, to let a felt sense come, to recognize it when it does, and to stay with it, so that new emotions and new steps can come. One must know that a felt sense is less intense than an emotion. If one always seeks for intensity one will miss the felt sense, even if it is already there. The felt sense is often slight, at first, and easily passed up, even if it has already come. And, usually, to let it come, one must be willing to attend quietly to inward physical sentience for a while, when nothing much is there.

Most people require certain special instructions to let a felt sense come. One has to place one's attention into the center of one's body, and sense what comes there in relation to some problem, situation, or aspect of life. The client can also ask certain verbal questions inwardly, such as, "What does that whole thing make... there, in the middle of my body?" Sometimes it helps to pretend, ironically, "That whole thing is just fine; it's all solved. Isn't it?" Usually the body quickly responds with the not-fine quality of that problem: "Oh — there it is — uh..."

Sometimes the felt sense comes without a therapist's deliberate and sensitive effort to help it come. But usually the therapist must know and work for a felt sense.

The felt sense is a physical quality. But intense emotion is physical too. One difference is that the felt sense does not at first fit a recognizable category. Its hallmark is that it is unclear, fuzzy, murky. Yet it has a very precise character, as one discovers if one tries to say what it is: It resists. It has a life of its own. It is already just so, "symbolized" in interaction, and it does not budge unless one finds those rare words, images, or moves that "fit." But a "fit" is a carrying further — a slight change one can feel. Quality words fit best, like "heavy", "sticky", "fluttery", "jumpy", "tight", or some odd phrase. An image can do even better. But words or images are important only to help hold on to the felt sense. Whether anything fits or not, we go on to ask, "What is it about that problem which makes my body feel this way?"

A whole science has developed, consisting of little moves to get a felt sense, and to engender the little steps which can come from it (Gendlin 1981, 1986b, 1987; Grindler, D, McGuire M. and Gendlin, E.T., 1982-83.) The instructions are needed because there is usually no felt sense. It must come, like emotions, appetite, sleep, and other bodily comings. We cannot control, but we know how to help, its coming, and how to make the ensuing change-steps more likely. The higher animals have both the wide and the narrowed interactional sentience, but only in action, not as inner things. Each time what comes must be received, but then one lets a fresh felt sense come. After a step there is a different one, and from it another step becomes possible.

Too much didactic work robs clients of the open space of their hour. That space is needed if a therapeutic process is to arise. A therapeutic process comes from deep under the client's conscious content; nothing we do substitutes for that process. If the therapist grabs the initiative too often or too long, then it does not come (and if it has come, it stops). Small bits of instructions may or may not succeed, but they do not derail the client's impetus. They can be inserted often.

Two needs for the present

Here I am concerned with two misunderstandings:

1. To process the past, it is not enough just to re-experience the past as it was. A new present experiencing is needed, to process the past.

2. Processing the past is not all we need. There also needs to be a processing of present life.

1. Present processing of the past

It is really an odd assumption, that repeating the past would change it. Why would it? Where would the change come from? And yet, therapy is often spoken about that way. For example, Freud said that transference is the vehicle of psychoanalysis. But how can the transference itself be the change-vehicle? It cannot very well be the transference that brings about the "resolution of the transference." What does, then? The cognitive interpretation doesn't make the change, either, as Freud also pointed out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1940). He also said that the "alliance with one analyst" shifts the energy-balance in favor of the ego. This is true; one can do more when one has a supportive ally. But just what is this more, which one does when one has the ally?

Of course, no one really thinks that just repetition changes anything. But why is therapy so often formulated that way? It happens even in descriptions of therapy in detail: One becomes aware of the repressed; one digs out the past; one finds what went wrong — yes. And then?

Clearly it cannot be that digging up and repeating the past is what brings change. Something is constantly missed here. There is something about how this digging up is done, so that the past changes in the very process of being seemingly only "dug up." It changes in the present act of being brought up. But, we all know that it changes sometimes — and sometimes not. To understand psychotherapy would be to understand *how the present process can change the past*, and can change our trouble as it comes up.

To change the past means a change in how the past affects us, how it functions in our present experience. We work on the past because it is implicit in our present experience and throws it off. But all present experience implicitly contains and is guided by past experience. Examine any present moment, and you will find a vast amount of the past implicit in it. When does it "guide," and when does it throw us off? The difference is that most of the time this past functions seamlessly. That means the past is not here in the old pieces. The past guides by being changed and fitted into the present, so that you actually experience the present. not the past. But, in some respects the past fails to function in this good way. Rather than becoming part of the new present, you experience the past instead, just as it was. It refuses to let itself be modified so as to become part of a present.

Therapy can be understood as being designed to let the past function differently, not as the shaped piece that it was, but part of a present process. Obviously, then, there has to be a present process, and the dug-up past has to be made a part of this present process, so that it can come to function as all other past experience functions.

I have pointed out that the context was probably not experienced as a felt sense in the past. So the felt sense cannot come just from repeating the past as it was.

Not only is the felt sense not there, in the past, but the wider sensing which was there, just before the traumatic events, is also missing. This is because once an emotion comes, it narrows that context.

For both reasons it is necessary, at some point, to move from an emotion to that wider context, the felt sense.

I have already mentioned that a felt sense is always in present time, and it brings both person's present attitudes into the totaling, so that it affects the past directly, as an experience. In contrast, when past emotions are re-lived as such, the present interaction provides only a (very important) outer rim.

Therapists of all orientations prize their patients. A close, gentle, and supportive interaction always matters. But it can remain separate if no felt sense is engendered, and the client's body is given over to the past experience as such. Instead, if the client begins with the felt sense of a problem, some aspect of present life, the past will often emerge too, but as part of present living. But many therapists don't know how to help a felt sense to come.

Of course, one is the present adult even while re-experiencing the past child. But if one physically re-experiences only the intense emotions of the past, then one brings one's present adult in only afterwards. Then one has the problem of "integrating" what one has re-lived, but this is a wishful word. What is the procedure for integrating? No single procedure, rather the traditional modes of therapy are usually cited for the integrating, after all. Focusing provides integration as it goes along.

At least sometimes, the past needs to be part of a felt sense if it is to change. It is not enough to re-live it as it was, and then return to present time at the end of a session. Moments of re-living need to come out of a felt sense, and moments later, again part of a changed felt sense, through many such steps. That is how the present changes the past.

Why is it that a felt sense is always in present time? Is this true? It seems so. It is my whole sense, now, of all that happened long ago and since, and how it all affects me now. It is a new totaling made by the present body. The past exists in it, and can be found in any felt sense. But it is how that past is carried now, in the wider present body. If that present totality implies the next steps, they will be different from what would come if the past is segmented off and lived as such.

2. Present processing of present life: New steps

One needs to experience not only how one was, but also how one needs to become — how one has never been!

One must not always go into the past from the felt sense. The past will always be there, still implicit in any present experience. But if the therapist insists on always going back into the past, then certain crucial new steps cannot come. Of course, processing the past has indirect results in present life, but there is also a felt-sense processing of present life. Indeed, that needs to be the overall context even while reworking the past, as I argued above. But surely we must be able to process present concerns as well!

A whole population of patients has developed who are expert at deep processing of the past, but cannot process present events. From any present difficulty

they go instantly to their childhood, and then process that instead.

Always going to the past involves assumptions we would never accept, if we saw them written out. It is as if nothing in the present can ever be difficult, as if reworking the past will automatically provide us with the development we missed over the years, as if we never needed or wanted new and further developments for ourselves, as if new steps were not constantly needed.

If permitted, the therapeutic process will bring something new, which will alter how the past is experienced.

For example: A client feels something very sore from the past, and a strong pull to die. She says that she badly needs rest, but resting is impossible, because something in her will not rest.

> "(silence) ... This needs to rest, and it can't. If it lets down and rests, it will die.
> (silence) ...
> "Now suddenly, it feels like a house on stilts. It is lifted off of this sore place. Now the sore place is like a layer, and it can breathe. Do you know those steel posts they put into the ground, to hold up a building? These stilts are like that.
> (silence) ...
> "Now that sore place can breathe."

Later she said, "When I was little, I played a lot with stilts. I used to go between power wires on them. It was dangerous, but it was play! Stilts! I haven't thought of those for years. And play, and danger. How does this process do that? It uses all these things to make something that wasn't there before."

I often find such things in people's dreams. For example, one person was touching something which could not be borne. Just touching it made everything slide. Earlier she had reported a dream in which there were other children. I knew enough to say "Let's bring them in with us. Children are safe. They're always good things. They could help us." Doing so felt better. Soon she said: "I think there were *lots* of children." Then she said, "*Oh, yes — a whole army of children!*" Now she could touch what had been untouchable before.[2]

Tears

Let me illustrate some of the above by discussing tears, and different kinds of crying.

First of all, the importance of tears does not lie only in the tears themselves. If tears are suppressed, all that would come with them may be held back as well.

Whenever I notice that clients force back the tears, I work to make crying welcome. If that isn't possible, I ask to hear what is in the way. And I bring the question up periodically, if I see tears being forced down. I say that I believe tears should be welcomed. I ask the client to decide to welcome the tears when they come again. I would like the client to send an inward message to the tears, that they are welcome to come — or not to come — not stopping them, or pushing them.

I think the message and attitude of inward permission (the same as in focusing generally) is one thing focusing can contribute. Letting is better than forcing. The new forcing (I *must* cry) is the same oppression as the old forcing down.

But I do not look only for a feeling of the crying. I also look for new steps of another kind.

When crying about the past is implicit, one need not always go there — again and again. About certain past events it never stops being possible to cry. That one can still cry in the same places does not mean one must keep going back to them. Nor does all past-processing come before new present growth-steps. Each can help enable the other. The present person must often get much stronger, before some past events can come and heal. I look for present growth steps from the start. Sometimes present steps, too, can bring tears.

Tears can be about life now, and not only when it is sad. A certain kind of tearfulness comes with the stirring of one's need for living *now*.

There are also quiet, gentle tears. The deepest tears are not always uncontrollable sobbing. Very gentle tears can be deeper still. They can come when people are deeply touched, or when they touch a deep part of themselves. Tears can come when something new stirs, and comes alive for a moment.

I welcome all kinds of crying, but it seems important to point to this, easily missed kind: when something *new* stirs, it may bring quiet tears. Then it would be foolish to try to convert that into something old. If the past were always deeper, life would be mostly over.

Such quiet, present crying can also be *about* the past. For example: "I tried so hard ..." (quiet tears come.) The person is inwardly touched; something stirs, senses itself, and cares for itself in a new way.

Such crying also comes with steps of present life. For example, someone long labeled "crazy", says, "When I hear you say that back to me, it seems to me almost like I *do* make sense," (tears).

Or a person developing a new way of caring for herself says, "Oh... I gave up my part of the program because I didn't feel there was time (tears) ... for me."

Another example: In response to something I said, one client said, "No. That's just wrong. (Long silence.) Just then, when I pushed you back, I felt myself! There *is* a me, behind all that stuff!"

Such new life-steps can happen with or without crying. That does not indicate their depth. Crying may not go with a new forward energy, but that energy may be a present life-step.

When steps are allowed to come freely, they may be about either the past or the present. The past is always implicit, but the step can be one of present life. Such steps are often more intricate than the common vocabulary, and provide new alternatives one could not possibly have predicted or invented.

Therapy does not consist only of present experiencing of the past. It includes present experiencing of the present.

From the felt sense one needs to ask not only "What is wrong?" but also "What needs to happen? In what direction is development? How do you need to be? What would a right step feel like?" It might be a forward energy, or a playfulness, or a needed new way that has no name.

If one always expects tears or some other emotional manifestation, and if one is set always to work with the past, one may fail to recognize new steps, and one will also fail to engender them. Then one processes only what is wrong, and not what has never yet been and needs to develop.

We all have to rework the past. But when new forward-moving life stirs in the client, that isn't the moment to re-assert the past.

When a new step comes, receiving it needs no special skill. But it does need the therapist's company and welcome, so that the new step has time fully to come in, and be.

Therapists are in the habit of always looking for what is wrong. But when a new step comes, it is the new step that needs to be responded to. One needs to respond to anything new that might be better, more hopeful, more alive, more assertive, freer, gentler, any new move. One need not always look for something wrong with it. There is time to do that later, if it turns out to be necessary.

Similarly, I hope it is obvious that when a step brings a new shape, the therapist would not want to push the client back into a past shape.

For example, one client at a crucial juncture, in relation to the desire to die, got a quiet new step. She felt her usual self lifted up, as if on stilts, so that a deep layer underneath could breathe. Surely one wouldn't want to respond with, "Does that feel precarious?" or "When did you ever use stilts?" At that moment, when she is alive in a new way, we wouldn't want to return her to an old way.

This client did later tell me that she played with stilts as a child. In a dangerous game she often went on them between the power-wires near her home. It was then clear that this past experience was part of her present new step. It retained the sense of moving in a dangerous place. But look how this past was freshly re-worked in a step from this felt sense, now — a step she never had before. Old ways remain possible; she could easily be back in them. One could ask about the past pain which made her tempt death then. I would do that later, if she had not often felt that already. But a new step is easily lost; one easily falls back into an old shape. No therapist would want that.

Conclusion

This paper was written in response to a chapter written by Dr. Kathleen McGuire and then revised and expanded in response to what I learned in further conversation with her.

When two methods integrate in the body of one therapist, the sensitivities trained by each method

therapist, the sensitivities trained by each method come to be implicitly present in how one practices the other. Then the usual words no longer have the same meaning. Dr. McGuire has the sensitivities of both methods. Therefore much of my critique of "cathartic" methods is addressed to others, not to her chapter where "catharsis" now has a more specific and informed meaning. For example, she says she "hardly ever lets people pound for very long." She often stops "hollow acting out" and gets the person to focus, so that something "more basic" comes. When she sees tears in clients' eyes, she asks them to get a felt sense in that place. So focusing is implicit in how she practices "catharsis." She distinguishes between "repetitions of the past" and "deep processing" (her term). Clearly, the latter is no longer just what I have been calling "catharsis" above.

She also practices focusing itself, of course. She uses focusing when emotional discharge becomes repetitive. She emphasizes the present felt-sense about the past. She receives what comes, so she would not constantly send clients back into the past, when a present step has come. Perhaps all I had to add is an equal emphasis on such felt-sense steps of present life.

Room for emotion and felt sense can be made within any method.

FOOTNOTES

1. In a review of *Focusing*, Keith Borden (1988) points out:

> In *Primal Man* (1975) and *Prisoners of Pain* (1980), Janov warns against what he calls 'abreaction' ... with great intensity but without a deep connection. Also ... Janov warns that even a genuine primal ... may not lead anywhere because it is being used as a defense against feeling more superficial pains. (Finally) it is possible to wallow in the pain of an event again and again without achieving anything more than the masochistic indulgence of bathing ourselves in pain.
>
> Another way of characterizing ... these therapeutic missteps is to say that they lack two key elements of ... focusing: discerning the body's message at a deep feeling level, and letting this discernment lead to a body shift, a shift in the organism's inner stance toward a situation or itself. ... When "false primals" occur, it is focusing which is lacking.

Evidently, these pitfalls of re-living have been known for a long time, and the experienced reviewer cited here finds focusing to be the missing element.

In the same review, Borden also writes:

> However, ... focusers do not "primal"... Gendlin ... counsels keeping a certain distance from the feelings which emerge. Deep feelings are witnessed, questioned, and listened to, but not entered into.

I hope this article clarifies this impression. If an emotion has been felt over and over again, we might do something like he describes, to keep from falling into the same place one more time. Usually, we would fully receive and respond to an emotion at the intensity at which it came. But, we would not work to intensify it artificially either. We would welcome it at its own intensity, and certainly we "enter into" it.

Yes, we often counsel finding "the right distance" — where one can feel "the whole thing," because that is where a felt sense comes.

Perhaps focusing can be used to avoid emotional directness and intensity. If so, then what Borden says needs to be quoted and pondered. But, it is important to emphasize that one must step back, to let a felt sense come. If that is always understood as an avoidance, and if every familiar emotional tonality is always heightened, then one will necessarily repeat the same emotions over and over.

Borden knows from experience that focusing makes for a deep connection, and that then a bodily shift comes. But he does not recognize that focusing is not only deeper, but also *wider*. In contrast to an emotion, a felt sense *forms from more of the present body*, and that is probably why a felt shift comes.

2. Peter Levine (1990) has developed a new method, working from neurological sources. He writes:

> Just as the driver, enjoying the countryside, actively "becomes unaware of'" and constricts the periphery of his environment when another car comes rapidly towards him on the same side of the road, constricts his visual field, becoming unaware of events in his visual periphery, so the individual experiencing anxiety loses touch with the sea of his sensations and body awareness.

Levine's therapeutic method is based on the neurological theory that

> If a person preparing to escape a threatening situation by running, will, if this attempt is thwarted, have those responses ... diminished in future situations. ... The individual may suffer a pervasive deficit in a whole class of defense behaviors. In this sense ... (this) is profoundly disembodying.

> ... re-enactment ... leads to a seemingly bottomless hole ... of despairing repetition of the original traumatic episode. ... It is suspected that endorphine levels are increased upon traumatic re-exposure and therefore patients may feel relief ...

Levine works with the events that led up to the trauma, but not until he first prepares a number of ways to '"restructure" the neurological sequence of events so that it comes out as it should have, rather than as it did.

> In order to avoid re-traumatization, reworking must occur ... gradually ... from the periphery of the sequential events surrounding the trauma towards its center.

Also:

> As it is most often useful to approach traumatic events "peripherally" with positive aspects, I ask (the patient) to tell me more about the parts (which gave him) pleasure, pride, and excitement.

Levine's method requires training. I cite it here because it shows some of the considerations I mentioned, but in quite different terms.

David Grove (1989), working with adults who were abused as children, similarly warns against re-traumatization. His valuable method can be learned from available audio tapes. He also works gently from the periphery inward, and also emphasizes certain positive aspects which can come newly in bodily-felt imagery. For example, something suddenly appears and wraps itself protectively around the client-as-a-child.

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